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THE TREND OF CHILD WELFARE WORK

BY HELEN V. BARY

THE greatest enemy of childhood has been the fatalistic complacency with which every phase of child life has been regarded. The coming of children into the world, their adjustment or lack of adjustment to physical, social and educational conditions, have all been taken for granted. The diseases of childhood, with their great toll of deaths, have been considered unavoidable. Infant mortality, until recently, had scarcely been computed; the very suggestion that these deaths were largely preventable would have been regarded as little short of blasphemous.

The general awakening of the nineteenth century to the wrongs of various classes of society brought with it the discovery of the abnormal child,—the orphan, the delinquent, the cripple and the child laborer. The past generation offered its solutions to these problems, solutions which to a large extent have become the problems of today. However, the definition of the wrongs of special classes of children has brought in its wake the definition of the rights of all children. This is the signal contribution of the twentieth century.

If all the work in behalf of children could be recorded the account of the past century would be illumined by the portraits of unnumbered men and women who renounced the peaceful ways of life to devote themselves to the hopelessly crippled, the hopelessly feeble-minded, the hopelessly defective children. It was a sacrifice of the normal in the interests of the abnormal, in many instances an apparent waste of the finest of our people to prolong lives which in themselves were hardly worth continuing. But the concrete justification of the sacrifice has now been shown. Out of the work for the abnormal minority has come the knowledge upon which preventive work for the vast majority is built today.

In 1909 President Roosevelt summoned the White House Conference to consider the needs of dependent children, those most obviously requiring the special protection of the State. The Conference passed various recommendations, the most far-seeing of which was that there should be established in the Government itself a bureau charged with the sole duty of considering the interests of all children in the United States. In 1918, in the midst of the turmoil of the Great War, the Children's Bureau called an International Conference to consider and enunciate standards for the well-being of all children. The significance of these two conferences has not yet been fully comprehended. They record a tremendous broadening of viewpoint. They established solid ground upon which a connected structure of child welfare work could be erected.

The Conference of 1918 created a charter for all children. In terms as definite as possible it outlined minimum standards of health, of education, of recreation, and of social decency. Physicians and nurses had worked in the fields of child hygiene; industrial investigators had studied the child in industry, and social workers had labored to correct and abolish specific social wrongs. With a breadth of vision which the next generation will credit more justly than we can possibly today, the Conference linked together all the phases of work for the well-being of children and brought out the essential unity of physical, educational and social standards of child life. The establishment of standards has given the nation definite goals to attain and definite paths by which to attain those goals. Work for children has passed from the stage of personal kindness and sentimentality, to the stage—no less kind—where we ask to be definitely assured that what we are doing is for the ultimate good of the child.

The alarming evidence of the poor physical condition of the young men of this country, made public by the examinations under the draft law, has greatly stimulated the fundamental health work being done by the schools. In this matter our experience is similar to that of the British in connection with their findings of poor physique during the Boer War. Progressive educators have long recognized the relation between physical fitness and mental capacity, but the public which prided

itself upon free compulsory education had not yet deemed health a part of the preparation for life. Today we have preventive health work in a large number of our schools. The figures of these school examinations, read in connection with the figures shown by the draft examinations, furnish material for fundamental thinking and action. For example, Los Angeles reports on the testing of 86,731 school children. Among these children there were reported 36,222 physical defects, of which defective teeth, eyesight, tonsils, adenoids, poor posture, and malnutrition were numerically the most important. Of this 36,222, only 348 were classed as irremediable. This represents less than one-half of one per cent of the children examined. The draft figures showed physical defects among over 29 per cent of the young men of the country sufficient to cause their rejection from the army. In many cases, of course, the defects were still remediable, but their continuance indicates an unnecessary handicap to the individual, and an economic loss to the nation.

All these examinations of children bring out the prevalence of malnutrition, a subject which is now receiving the careful attention of scientific investigators. Between the theory, on the one hand, that malnutrition is due solely to ignorance of the laws of dietetics, and the opposing theory which interprets the dangerous prevalence of malnutrition only in terms of the high cost of food, the truth probably is that malnutrition is due to the combination of poverty, ignorance, and lack of civic responsibility which are the root evils of most of our social ills.

In a recent investigation of nearly 200,000 school children in New York City, 17.3 per cent were graded as in excellent condition regarding nutrition; 61.1 per cent passable; 18.5 per cent poor, and 3.1 very poor. The two lowest grades were considered in need of medical care, or at least careful supervision. This figure of 21.6 per cent of the children as suffering from malnutrition is not considered by Dr. S. Josephine Baker, Director of Child Hygiene in New York City, as higher than the figures for the city as a whole. She estimates that malnutrition among children increased from 5 per cent in 1914, to 21 per cent in 1917. Dr. Royal S. Copeland, Commissioner of Health for New York City, gives the figures of 3.1 per cent in 1909 and 19.9

per cent in 1919. Dr. Thomas D. Wood estimates that for the whole country, between 15 and 25 per cent of the school children (from 3,000,000 to 5,000,000 children) are undernourished.

The extent of malnutrition among school children has led many educational authorities to attempt to alleviate the condition. Some interesting experiments in school lunches were made in Los Angeles nearly fifteen years ago under the direction of Miss Norah Sterry. Other experiments have been carried on in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Cincinnati and other cities. The United States Bureau of Education has given much intelligent stimulus to this work, but we cannot be considered to have done much more in this country than pathfinding. England has developed the school lunch to a much wider extent than we, due mainly to the fact that the extent and consequences of malnutrition were brought home to the British authorities nearly twenty years ago.

The scientific studies of malnutrition now being made include not only a study of the physical condition of the children under observation, but also an investigation of all the factors responsible for producing this condition. Ignorance of the laws of hygiene must be met by sound public health instruction presented in clear, understandable, interesting, and even dramatic ways. Inferior milk, water and food supplies must be improved by arousing community interest and responsibility in these problems of community housekeeping. This education in hygiene and sanitation is vital, but its scope will be limited and its influence superficial until the root problem of poverty is attacked in a systematic manner. Thus, little by little, the field of social work is being extended to touch that of scientific agriculture, scientific management, and other scientific branches of investigation engaged in working towards the abolition of poverty.

In the Children's Year campaign of 1918, over seven million young children were weighed and measured. This was done in nearly every hamlet and corner of the country, and few were the babies whose parents failed to be introduced to the idea that there were recognized standards for the normal development and growth of children. The testing of the children was conducted in a simple fashion, but each child's measurements were recorded

on a card which also gave the normal height and weight of a child at the various stages of his development.

Out of this campaign to interest the mass of the people in the care of children came the widespread recognition of the public character of child hygiene. Eight State Governments had previously organized child-hygiene divisions. Since the Children's Year campaign, twenty-seven more States have added such divisions to their functions.

In the public support of this work, New Jersey heads the list with an annual appropriation of \$150,000. Idaho, by contrast, has but \$1,900 a year. In Minnesota the legislature created such a division but failed to make any appropriation. In this emergency the State Public Health Association secured the coöperation of various medical and health organizations and succeeded in carrying on a most effective educational campaign for child health without a cent of public appropriation.

The work of the State Child Hygiene Divisions is still in a pathfinding stage, their scope varying widely according to local needs and the existence and development of child welfare activities by private organizations.

Their methods are distinctly educational, conducted through the channels of exhibits, health centers, classes, campaigns and general publicity. The health center, as usually developed, is a community-educational center whose functions are not only to advise on the hygiene of the child, but to conduct, as well, classes for the systematic teaching of mothers.

Normal schools, teachers' institutes, and other institutions for the training of teachers, are emphasizing their instruction in hygiene. Several States have prepared courses in hygiene for the elementary schools. Particularly where other health machinery has not been developed, the education given in the public schools becomes increasingly important.

The broadened viewpoint in the field of social welfare has shown a development fully equal to that in the field of health. Among the most active charities of the past generation was the erection of institutions for dependent children, institutions which the social worker of today is endeavoring to curtail, if not abolish. Practically all of the States have now adopted the

policy of meeting the problem of dependency by granting allowances to the mothers of such children so that families may not be broken up because of poverty alone. The very rapid growth of the Mothers' Pension Movement indicates the widespread belief that normal family life is a right which should be given to every child whenever possible.

The recognition of the necessity for thorough and coördinated work for children is strikingly shown by the widespread movement for the unifying and codifying of legislation affecting children. In most of our States child welfare legislation has grown up piecemeal—the laws have been amended and re-amended, gradually broadening the essential "charity" angle to meet the more modern viewpoint. The results of this patchwork are characteristic of the method, and many of the laws affecting children permit various anomalous conditions.

In the majority of the States today, active work is being conducted along the lines of codifying and unifying child welfare legislation. In seventeen States, official bodies have been appointed to carry out this work. The distinction of having adopted the first children's code in the United States belongs to Ohio, where a Children's Code Commission was appointed in 1911.

The task of these Code Commissions is not merely to straighten out the codes from a technical standpoint. It is to write a code which shall express in laws the modern viewpoint of the relation of the State to all children. Its programme of work usually consists of intensive study into all the agencies and institutions affecting children—education, health, recreation, industry, charities, corrections, juvenile courts, etc.—before any direct work upon the codes is begun. The success of a given commission depends largely upon the degree to which the commission educates the people of the State so that there may be built up an extensive body of intelligent public opinion and civic responsibility.

It is ordinarily true that the evils which are generally denounced are by that very fact on the road to remedy, and the most serious ills are those to which we are as yet blind. No exception to this rule need be made in the matter of child labor.

As we have been educated to visualize the problem, the term "child labor" calls up a mental picture of the child in the Southern cotton mill or the New York sweat-shop. It is consequently rather startling to have the evidence of investigators in the mill towns of Georgia and the Carolinas who report on the greatly improved standard of living of the mountain folk who have come down to work in the mills.

Undoubtedly the most serious problem of child labor today is that of agricultural work. The evil of a situation is not only positive, but negative—not only the conditions which it creates, but also the conditions which it denies. Rural child labor in vast areas of the United States today carries with it the virtual denial of education. In this country, which has proclaimed free and compulsory education to be the cornerstone and safeguard of democracy, *one child out of every eight between the ages of 10 and 15 is gainfully employed in occupations entirely unregulated by State or Federal law.* The vast majority of these children are engaged in some form of farm labor. The occupations in which they are working are not in themselves necessarily harmful, but the prohibitive cost of education which isolation implies, entails a rate of illiteracy which is a distinct social menace.

There are in the United States, according to the last decennial census, over 5,000,000 illiterate persons. Some 35 per cent of this total may be charged to the foreign-born, but for nearly 65 per cent of this illiteracy we must shoulder the responsibility and the consequences. At a time when all the institutions of society are being called into question, we are confronted with the fact that millions of our people cannot be reached by any of the customary channels of intelligence.

The direct relation between rural child labor and a high rate of illiteracy becomes immediately obvious when the two rates are indicated on a map. The vicious circle of unintelligent and consequently unprofitable farming, poverty, and ignorance must somehow be broken for the safety of the nation as well as in the interest of the child.

The problems of children are not problems to be studied apart from other social phenomena. The child must be considered in relation to his family. The educational, physical and social

condition of the children of the country is the clearest index we have to our national life. The infant mortality rate of cities is used by more than one commercial institution as a general index to the prosperity, civic responsibility and general well being of the community. The searching questions that are being asked today in regard to children reach to the very foundations of our national life. They call into question every institution of society and every relation of human beings. That these questions are being asked earnestly and seriously by great numbers of people is one of the most hopeful indications of the present day.

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